**\*\*\* Part 1: The Cadet**

**PROLOGUE**

***Fourth day of the third month of spring, 2120***

**ODAY WAS NOT A HAPPY DAY FOR THE DEFAKIRAN FAMILY. It was sad because one of its members was being sent away. His Grace, the duke, had ordered Malakiah, his eldest son and also the Marquis or heir apparent, to leave their home in the town of Garend to commence training as a Perencian Knight in the distant capital city of Suena. This decision was not appreciated by all whom it involved.**

**The travel party met in the courtyard of Castle Graystone at the first light of the day. Its members consisted of seven individuals. The party’s leader was Captain Baylor Escard, the duke’s captain of the guards. He had sandy-blond hair, light-blue eyes, and a rugged but handsome, clean-shaven face. The next five men were soldiers personally selected by Baylor: his aide Sergeant Kellor, Derwyn Lohm, Xenthius Yunth, Adamis Bethan, and Herzan Dinex. As the party would travel through dangerous territory, the captain had picked only men he knew he could trust to fight fiercely. The seventh member was Lord Malakiah Defakiran, the duke’s son. The youth was muscular with short, brown bushy hair and piercing blue eyes. Baylor’s solemn responsibility was to ensure His Lordship’s safe arrival, and he never took his duties lightly.**

**This journey would normally have been one that all looked forward to. Baylor remembered fondly traveling to Suena eighteen years ago for knightly training. But because Malakiah did not desire to become a knight, the duke has ordered Baylor to convey the young man there. His Grace had even authorized the captain, should it become necessary, to tie the youth on his horse! And, if further warranted, in a very undignified position!**

**Baylor hoped such an action would be unnecessary. He liked young Malakiah. Nonetheless, Baylor had no choice but to follow the duke's will. Malakiah might be the duke’s son and therefore able to command in his own right, but the lad’s wishes could not override his father’s.**

**Baylor reflected further. As was Baylor, the duke was a Perencian Knight of the Bronze Order and perhaps had frequently considered having his eldest son become one as well. As the heir apparent, Malakiah would need superior training in the science of combat and the art of leadership, and, as a Perencian Knight, he could hardly receive better instruction. Baylor was certain of that! The duke and especially the duchess probably could not bear the thought of Malakiah being absent from them for five years and so had not pursued the idea. Instead, they clung to the notion they themselves, through tutors, could handle his training.**

**Over these last few years, however, Malakiah’s behavior had worsened; he was hardly the image of the son that his parents would have wanted. Instead, he was very arrogant and most conscious of his highborn birth. Baylor knew personally that the lad had frequently subjected anyone—soldier, servant, merchant, peasant, whatever—to physical abuse or legal action should they annoy him or fail to obey his slightest whim. And because he was the duke’s son, none would dare protest. Moreover, with Malakiah at the age when he was expected to practice knightly duties and study the materials that he would need to know if he was to reign someday as his father had before him, he had neglected these responsibilities. Baylor knew that while the youth relished sword fighting and wrestling and was extremely strong for one his age and size, he was prone to neglect his studying. Worse, he disregarded the worshipping of Adonai completely, shunning the expected daily prayers or attending temple services. Such irreligious behavior was unheard of for a member of the family of Defakiran and had much displeased his father and especially his mother.**

**At first, his father and Baylor had stretched themselves to make the youth take the harness. Their efforts had come to naught. Finally, the captain reckoned, his parents had realized that they had no other alternative—the youth’s behavior forced them to consider that perhaps the only means to amend his character was the heavy disciplining that being a member in the Perencian Order would ladle out to him. Still, had it not been for the business of the Shadowlurkers, Malakiah might have escaped being sent to Suena.**

**Baylor’s reflections were interrupted by the arrival of the duke and the duchess. His Grace was tall and muscular with brown hair; Her Grace was slender and black-haired. Her eyes seemed red. The men snapped to attention as the duke strode toward the party while the duchess stayed back. Malakiah, however, continued slouching against his horse.**

**The duke spoke a few words to each of the men and then had a short talk with Baylor, mostly exchanging words on which routes to take to Suena. Then he came to face his son. They stared at each other for a full minute. Finally, the duke spoke.**

**“My son, think not for one minute you have anyone to blame but yourself for making this trip necessary. Your mother and I will miss you and pray that Adonai keeps you safe. Learn your lessons well. Pray write your mother often—she will worry should you fail to. And, if you will permit him to be, you will find that my old friend, Sir Heddrick, the Duke of Suena, who is now the head of the Perencian Order of Knights, can be an invaluable help to you. Or your worst nightmare.”**

**Malakiah rolled his eyes and said, “The only thing I will miss about this place is my personal chef’s cooking.”**

**The duke’s eyes flashed. “Come back not until you prove yourself worthy to be a knight and my heir,” he snapped. He turned on his heel and swiftly left the courtyard.**

**Now the duchess came forward and seized Malakiah in a fierce embrace. Baylor could tell she only kept from crying with effort. “Why,” she asked, “angered you your father so just now? You wanted your separation from him to be in that way?”**

**“I only spoke as I felt, Mother.”**

**“I tried for hours to have your father reconsider his decision—to no avail.” Malakiah understood her difficulty there. His father never made rash decisions. And once decided, the duke would never change his mind unless presented with new evidence, or he could be shown that the course he had chosen was impossible.**

**His mother continued, still holding him tightly. “Your father just kept saying you had forced this course upon us. Still, it is hard for me to let you depart from us for so long. I will miss you every day.”**

**“Good-bye, Mother. May Adonai watch over you and Father. I shall miss you too.”**

**“Forget not your brother Alcham, my son.”**

**“Yes, dear Brother, forget me not,” came a voice from by the door. Malakiah looked in that direction. There stood a lanky lad with dark hair—Alcham, his younger brother by three years. He smirked. “Mother,” he said, “Father wants you to return inside now. Allow the great knight-to-be to take his leave.”**

**Malakiah’s mother released him reluctantly with one final squeeze and headed inside, obviously blinking back tears.**

**The two youths stared at each other. Alcham smirked again. “Better you than me, Brother. Going away for years, studying hard, drilling, learning to be a soldier. I will dwell upon you while I remain here living the life of a duke’s son. By the way, I think I will make the acquaintance of that chambermaid who is so taken of you. You certainly will not be around for a while!”**

**Malakiah was beside himself. He started to walk over toward his taunter, but Captain Baylor stepped between them.**

**“No, my lord, as much as the men and I would enjoy seeing you wish your brother *farewell*, I cannot allow it. It would upset your mother too much. Now, attend to your horse. We leave in a few minutes.”**

**Alcham sneered. “Behold, my brother, the future great warrior, held back by Father’s lapdog. Step around that cur and meet me!”**

**Baylor glared at Alcham. “This *lapdog*, boy, could bite your empty head off.”**

**Alcham ignored the captain’s response. “Be sure to have the maid in your room at the Fortress of the Perencian Order of Knights make up your bed each morning. And have your valet lay out your armor every day. And when they bring you your meals to your room on a tray, be sure they use the good silverware and linen napkins. And pay one of the smart students to take your examinations.”**

**Baylor looked at Malakiah. “I just may let you say *farewell* to your brother after all.”**

**The captain, however, was spared the decision. Joskim, the castle’s head steward, came to the doorway with a message from the duke. Alcham was to return inside immediately!**

**Alcham left the courtyard, smirking like a dragon who had captured a virgin princess.**

**Almost as soon as his brother left, another individual arrived. He was Adremius, an elderly, fat gnome who had served as one of his instructors; he had short, white hair, a long, wispy beard and mustache, and gnarled hands. He wore a blue robe with pants and sandals.**

**“Lord Malakiah,” he called out.**

**Malakiah turned and noticed the gnome. *What was he here for?* he wondered.**

**“My lord,” the diminutive one said, “I have brought you this book. Read it, pray, when you are able. It will aid you in your days ahead.”**

**The gnome handed Malakiah a small, leather-bound book; the youth took it and glanced at its cover. *Wisdom for a Young Man* was its title; he quickly thumbed through it. It contained sayings and short instructional stories designed to provide inspiration and guidance. *Reading it would be tedious and trivial*, he thought, but he respected his old instructor too much to express this opinion.**

**“Thanks, Master Adremius,” he said, “I will employ this book suitably.” *Probably to use its pages to start fires with,* he thought.**

**“I know your feelings about going to Suena—we all are. I regret your destiny has turned out so. All that I can counsel you is to try to make the best of the situation. Rail not against it—that will only lead you to frustration and despair. Instead, try to find something in it that brings you satisfaction. Dwell on that and nourish it! Farewell, my lord. May your Adonai keep you safe in the days and years to come, my student.”**

**“Farewell to you too, Master Adremius,” Malakiah replied. “I will try to apply your wise teachings. I only wish I attended to my studies better.”**

**“I am sure you attempted the best you could—for a human. Farewell again.”**

**The gnome now turned and strolled back into the castle. The youth reluctantly tucked the book into a pouch tied to his saddle.**

**Baylor called out for all his men to finish checking their gear and the packhorses; they would leave in a few minutes. During this time, Malakiah had another visitor. Unnoticed, a figure with a hood pulled down over his head crept into the courtyard and approached the youth.**

**“Mal,” the figure whispered.**

**Malakiah recognized the voice. It was Kaimen or Kame—his longtime friend. *What was he doing here?* They were forbidden to see each other, and Kame certainly was not supposed to be in the courtyard. “Kame? What brings you here? And why? You know you should not be here. You could get in serious trouble.”**

**“I just had to see you off. You will be gone for a long time. And here, take this.” The figure handed him a large leather pouch. “It is for you on the trip. Adonai keep you safe, Mal.”**

**“Thanks, Kame. Now go quickly. Before someone notices you.”**

**“Verily. Farewell. Till we see each other again.” They clasped hands.**

**“My lord,” Baylor called out, “who is that figure by you? He is not one of our party.”**

**When he heard the captain’s cry, Kame ran out of the courtyard. The guards looked to Baylor for a command to pursue the hooded figure.**

**Malakiah spoke up. “Captain, men, that was just a friend wishing to say farewell to me. He meant no harm and is now gone. There is no need to pursue him.”**

**The guards looked to Baylor. The captain just shrugged and said to finish their departure preparations. Malakiah looked inside the pouch. Kame had given him some food, useful tools, a journal, a few items to game with, and a money pouch containing coins. *Thank Adonai for a friend such as Kame*, he thought. He tied the bag to his saddle.**

**Malakiah had one more visitor, but she did not have to steal into the courtyard. She walked in silently, coming up behind the youth. Baylor saw her and she him, but they just nodded to each other. She tapped the youth lightly on the shoulder. He turned and saw her. She was quite a breathtaking sight—a young, comely Elven woman with white hair, delicate violet eyes, and tawny skin. She wore a simple floor-length white robe with long sleeves. She was a healer, someone blessed by Adonai with a gift to heal the injured.**

**“Ateena,” Malakiah said softly, “I never imagined you would come to see me off.” He had known this Elven female all his life. He was deeply smitten by her, but Ateena had turned him down his precocious proposal of marriage, both because of the differences between their races and her dedication to her faith for healers could not marry.**

**“Malakiah, how could I not see you off? You will be gone for many years. I have come to give you and the party Adonai’s blessings before you depart.”**

**“How can you bless such a misbegotten trip? Surely you must know how I feel about going to Suena—about becoming a knight! Blast my misfortune!”**

**“Mal, trust in Adonai to set the correct path before you. Battle not against your present troubles. Instead, seek the peace of Adonai to comfort you and ask that He grant you the wisdom to discern how you should proceed in the days, weeks, months, and years to come.”**

**“Teena, lack you ever for platitudes?”**

**The healer frowned at his mild insult, then smiled at him. “Malakiah, I forgive you for your harsh words because I know you are currently very upset. Again I remind you if you ask for Adonai’s aid, He shall never withhold it from you. May He be a bastion of strength for you as you go to Suena and undergo your knightly training. Adonai’s manifold blessings be upon you, Malakiah, son of Josias.”**

**“Pray leave my father out of this, Teena.”**

**The Elven lady smiled again. “I know you truly mean not that, Mal. You will soon forgive your father.” She then turned toward the others and clapped her hands together several times. Captain Baylor and the others stopped and looked at her in surprise.**

**“May it please you, Captain Baylor and you others,” she said, “but before your departure, I would like that we all join together in a song of praise to Adonai. Then I will give you a blessing. With your permission, Captain Baylor, I will proceed.”**

**Captain Baylor nodded, and the healer then led a familiar hymn extorting praises and thanksgivings. Malakiah mouthed the words but felt nothing. Ateena then began a prayer.**

**“Most merciful and great Adonai, we ask that you watch over these men as they journey to the far city of Suena. Guide their footsteps and protect them from all harm. And be it Your Will that all of them…” She paused, looking at Malakiah, then continued, “that most of them soon return safely home to us. May he who shall stay behind have Your guidance and comfort there. So be it according to Your Will, divine Lord Adonai.”**

**The healer was now finished and making to depart; Malakiah, however, had one last matter to discuss with her.**

**“Ateena, I pray you, before you go, there is something that I would ask you about.”**

**“Yes, Mal? What might it be?”**

**“Remember you that night I proposed to you?”**

**She gave him a quizzical look. “Verily, I remember. That proposal was most presumptive of you! And improper! You should have known full well that a union between us could never be! I have my duties as a healer! You will have your obligations someday as our future duke. And even if such were not so, what is more, my being an elf, as the years go by, you would grow old, and I would remain young. I would outlive you by perhaps two centuries! Surely then, you are not still determined to press your suit!”**

**“Verily, no, Teena. You misunderstand the thrust of my question. I remind you of that because the night before I so asked you, I saw in the sky a reddish-orange moon. And I saw the same the night before my grandfather, Gorgian…”**

**“May he rest in Adonai’s Abode,” murmured Ateena.**

**Malakiah continued. “Thank you. The night before my grandfather, Gorgian, died . . .” He paused for a second; then, he turned to face the healer. “I saw another reddish-orange moon last night. And now I am to head off to Suena to begin my knightly training. Ateena, what might this mean? Might this odd moon foretell that this journey—my training—forebodes disaster?”**

**Ateena smiled at the youth and took his hands in hers. “Verily, Mal, I cannot say. Signs such as you speak of defy interpretation. I cannot even say if these moons you saw are even signs! But my secure advice to you is this—look not for counsel or guidance from signs or omens. Instead, trust your faith in Adonai to lead you safely through life.”**

**Having said these words of counsel, she departed, favoring Malakiah with one final smile and a squeeze of his hand with hers.**

**The youth returned to his horse, checking the fastenings of his saddle one more time. Then he pricked up his ears. *What was that he just heard?* Listening carefully, he heard more. He walked over to the suspect soldier. He placed his left hand on the man’s right shoulder, spun him around, and punched the man squarely on the chin. The struck soldier, Xenthius, surprised, fell to the ground.**

**“Say anything such as that again,” Malakiah snarled, “and I will give you much worse.”**

**The fallen soldier rubbed his chin and looked up at the youth. “Were you not the duke’s brat,” he said, “I would pound your head on the stones of this courtyard.”**

**Malakiah replied, raising his fists, “You have my leave to disregard that fact, you oaf.”**

**Xenthius stood up and looked around. Baylor was nowhere in sight. He glanced toward Sergeant Kellor; the sergeant merely shrugged his shoulders and folded his arms across his chest. *Good,* Xenthius thought; he glared at the youth. “Verily, I am going to enjoy beating you senseless, whelp! Let us see what color blood you have!”**

**The two began circling each other. The other four men gathered around them. Xenthius was slightly taller and several years older, but Malakiah was more massive. Neither one had a clear advantage.**

**Several punches flew, but the fight ended before one could connect. The captain re-entered the courtyard; with him were the castellan of Graystone, Sir Wilek Dinsmore, and his immediate subordinate, Lieutenant Lander Westfield. When Captain Baylor saw Malakiah and the soldier battling, he positioned himself between the two combatants.**

**“What in the duke’s name is going on here? I leave the courtyard for a few minutes and chaos erupts. Xenthius! What possesses you to presume you may fight His Lordship?”**

**“Captain Baylor,” Malakiah replied, “that man is not at fault. I struck him first and then gave leave for him to engage me.”**

**“Most extraordinary, my lord. Now, pray tell me what provoked this fight?”**

**“That man, Captain Baylor, made a most disrespectful remark about Ateena.”**

**Baylor looked at Xenthius. “Soldier,” he growled, “is that true? Answer me!”**

**Xenthius looked down and said, “Perhaps.”**

**The captain asked again. “Soldier, I order you to repeat what you said about the healer. You have just one chance to comply.”**

**“I said, ‘My stars, I bet that Elven minx could keep a man warm on a cold night. And I would surely like to be the man with her in my bed!’ Or at least words to that effect, sir!”**

**Baylor glared hard at Xenthius. Finally, he said, “Soldier, that woman is a healer. She is dedicated to Adonai’s service and further sworn to chastity. She would no more be interested in your amorous attentions than you would be to those of a love-sick she-troll! If I ever again hear of you talking in such a manner about any respectable woman, your career in my service will take a turn more unpleasant than you could imagine! Are my words quite *clear* to you, son?”**

**The man snapped to attention, crying, “Sir, most clear, sir!”**

**“Excellent. Now, go and attend to your horse.”**

**Xenthius gave Malakiah one final glare and turned away. As he returned to his mount, one of his fellow soldiers cuffed him slightly and said softly, “You dolt! I could have told you not to say anything such as that where the captain might get wind of it!”**

**“Go boggle a troll, Derwyn,” replied Xenthius.**

**“Sergeant Kellor,” Baylor meanwhile barked to his aide.**

**“Yes, sir,” the sergeant replied, approaching the captain.**

**“Record that man’s infraction in the trip’s log. I shall decide later if any punishment in his case is merited.”**

**“Yes, sir,” Kellor answered. He took out a large leather-bound book and, using a sharpened piece of charcoal, started writing an entry.**

**“And, Sergeant, why made you no effort to prevent this fight?”**

**The man paused in his writing, obviously ill at ease. “Captain, the boy—eh, His Lordship struck Xenthius and then gave his leave to the man to fight him. I assumed the matter would be permissible.”**

**Baylor glared at his aide; then he said, “Further add this to the log, Kellor. If, in your judgment, His Lordship gives any command or takes any action that might imperil him, others, or hinder this trip to Suena, you may disregard the command or prevent his action by any reasonable means. Also, in your judgment, any action that would not meet with my approval! *Understood*, Sergeant?”**

**“Yes, sir. Understood, sir!” His aide resumed writing, faster this time.**

**Captain Baylor then turned to Malakiah and said, “My lord, I concur with you in this case. Nonetheless, in the future, you shall leave any disciplinary action involving the men to me. Pray resume your preparations for our departure as well.”**

**Baylor turned back to Sir Wilek and Lieutenant Lander who had watched the potential fight with some concern. Baylor reassured them that he could keep his men under control and also manage His Lordship. The captain then discussed with them the business that they had come out here to talk over—who would govern the castle’s guards during Baylor’s absence. Baylor told them he had delegated Sergeant Ephram to handle these affairs. He assured them that the sergeant was quite capable. His Grace, the duke, was furthermore present to assume command if any emergency happened. These words reassured Sir Wilek and Lieutenant Lander; they then left the courtyard, returning inside the castle to have their breakfast.**

**Finally, at a word from Baylor, all mounted up. Malakiah, however, defiantly chose to take his time climbing into the saddle.**

**As they left, he heard some final taunts from his brother. “Feel you safe now, Garend, Suena, and the rest of Perencia? My brother, the great and powerful knight, rides forth to save the realm! Let all ogres, trolls, and giants tremble in fear! Let them run for the hills! Cower in their lairs! For my brother comes to slay them one and all! Oh, glorious day!”**

Part 1:

The Cadet

**Chapter 1**

**SUENA**

***Fourth day of the third month of spring, 2120***

**AYLOR LED HIS PARTY DOWN THE MANY TERRACES OF THE CITY. THE HOOVES OF THEIR HORSES RESOUNDED ON THE COBBLESTONES. Few people were outside yet; the riders saw mostly farm laborers heading to their fields. They passed by the marketplace and finally exited through the city gate. Malakiah looked back at the portal with its ten-foot turrets on either side; he wondered when he would see them again. He glanced toward the battlements of Castle Graystone. There he thought he saw his mother. He waved and received one in return.**

**The party crossed gently rolling hills of farmland toward the talus-covered slopes of the Peridian Mountains. After several hours, they reached their base. Malakiah saw the treacherous curving switchbacks twisting up the steep, rocky mountainside; he knew they were the only way over the mountain. Despite the times he had traveled this route before, he never felt safe on it. His horse always seemed to want to see how close to the path’s edge it could walk. The youth looked at the others. Baylor seemed unaffected by being on a narrow path on a steep mountainside, but the others showed slight apprehension. Malakiah chose to look at the side of the mountain and let his thoughts wander.**

**Finally, they achieved the summit. The day had reached mid-afternoon, and Baylor ordered a rest once they discovered a stream where the horses could be watered. All dismounted, and they broke out their midday meal—rolls, sausages, and dried fruit.**

**Malakiah looked around. He recognized a familiar rock formation that had been nicknamed the Captain because of its resemblance to a sailor standing at the wheel of a ship. Similarly, the cliff below resembled, with a little imagination, the bow of a ship and was called Ship Rock. This area was where he, Alcham, and his father had often camped. The memory saddened Malakiah.**

**The youth felt little excitement. He desired not to join the Academy of the Perencian Order of Knights but knew he had no alternative. Escaping the party before he reached Suena would be foolhardy—he would be in the midst of the wilderness. *Perhaps, I could wait until I arrived in Suena and desert there, but again where would I go or what would I do?* He would be alone. He could expect no aid from his father. He had no money to live on and had no trade skills to earn a living. Malakiah smiled to himself. *I am a duke’s son, and all I know is living well on money not my own!***

**He reflected on his behavior of these last few years of his life—such had been the subject of a long lecture several nights ago by his father in which the duke had said he was arrogant and very conscious of his highborn birth. But, Malakiah thought, *why should he not be?* *He was to rule someday.* *Why should others not defer to his wishes? Let them protest his behavior. He was not accountable to them!*  His father had remarked on his indifferent attitude toward pursuing studies and acquiring military skills. *Nonsense!* Malakiah thought. *A ruler answered to no one! It was solely his right to decide what abilities he needed to acquire and what studies he should pursue.* Malakiah had undergone training in the areas of fighting, which he enjoyed, but saw no need to learn combat techniques. *When he succeeded his father as the duke, he would have advisors to guide him in those areas!* *Why learn them himself?* It was about religion he and his father were most at odds about. The duke felt Adonai personally guided every man in all things, and that one should pray for assistance regularly. Malakiah perceived Adonai as an indifferent deity; praying thereby accomplished very little. However, he dared not declare that belief to his father—such would seem heresy. Instead, he preferred to let his father see him as lacking in his observance of the faith of Shem-adonti.**

**Verify, he, his father, and Captain Baylor had battled over what they called his improper behavior for the last several years now with his mother sometimes forced into the role of mediator. Because he was the heir apparent, both they and he knew he must fulfill certain criteria to be a fit ruler, but neither he nor they could agree on what these were.**

**The final sack that had made the mule sit down and refuse to budge, his father had said, had been the disclosure that he was the ringleader of the Shadowlurkers.**

***The group had started innocently enough*, Malakiah thought. *They had not even actually called themselves the Shadowlurkers.***

**They had just been Malakiah and his friends: Kame, Olaf, Hubert, Duther, Luthius, Moyner, Larither, and Curtius. Kame was his best friend in the group while Olaf had been the one he had always clashed shields with. When he and the others had been younger, they had played ball games and fought mock battles; in the last few months, they had strived to find more sophisticated entertainment. These efforts had led to their downfall.**

**The group’s initial diversion had been playing pranks on one another. Each one drew a name from a jug and then devised a trick to pull on the one whose name he had chosen. This game had kept them amused for a while, but eventually, they had become restless. They had then decided to start playing tricks on others outside their group.**

**At first, their targets had been the members of the Town Watch. They would act suspiciously to incite the Watchers to chase after them, thereby leading their targets into an area where the others could then pelt them with rotten food and other foul objects. Another favorite trick had been to set a smoky fire in an empty building (although always contained in a metal bin), causing Garend’s bucket brigade to race frantically to put it out. They also had liked befouling the public washing pool the night before wash day! They had committed many such misdeeds.**

**Their first great prank had involved Alcham. He had not been a member of his brother’s group. Alcham disliked any activity Malakiah participated in, and none of Malakiah’s friends liked him. That had made him a perfect victim.**

**Olaf had proposed the misdeed: kidnapping Alcham and leaving him imprisoned in some location. Meanwhile, a note would be left telling of his capture and demanding a ransom. They would not seek such—they figured that would be too dangerous. Just letting his parents and the Town Watch go crazy searching for him was sufficient for them!**

**Several group members had successfully captured Alcham—they had come up behind him silently, thrown a sack over his head, and bound him. Then they had left him in the locked storeroom of a bakery. They had known Alcham would soon free himself of the sack and the ropes binding him; then, the boy, unable to escape, would just have to await rescue.**

**They next had left a note affixed to the door of the Town Watch. It had stated that the duke’s younger son was a prisoner of those who lurked in the shadows. He would not be released until an appropriate ransom was paid. Details would follow swiftly.**

**Their prank had resulted in immediate chaos. First, the captain of the Town Watch had inquired at Castle Graystone. A swift search of the castle and an inquiry of the servants had revealed that the boy could not be accounted for. Then the massive search had begun. The duke and Captain Baylor had each led a separate party. Malakiah and Kame had been members of one. The search had lasted an entire day until Alcham had finally been found. The bakery’s owner had been seized and interrogated, but he had been able to prove his innocence. The captain of the Town Watch had had no luck determining who had been behind the abduction.**

**Olaf had been thrilled; he had thought the turmoil caused by the abduction had been hysterical and was willing to devise another, even bigger prank. Malakiah had counseled they should wait. He had not been opposed, however, to discussing a plan for future mayhem. One of the other boys, Luthius, had suggested something.**

**“I have this powder. Mix it in a drink, and everyone who drinks it will have to void his or her bladder almost immediately.”**

**The others had been unimpressed. “So what?” Duther had scoffed. “One person forced to pee! That is hardly a prank!”**

**Then Luthius had added with an evil grin, “But what if it was not one person, but a whole room full of people?”**

**Thus the idea for the group’s second prank had been born. They only now had to await a suitable occasion.**

**A few weeks later, the opportunity had arisen at an annual festival honoring Malakiah’s father. The festival would be held in the town’s marketplace where the duke gave a banquet for the people of Garend. The meal would always start with a toast to the health and long life of the duke—a perfect event to prank. Malakiah had felt no qualms about spoiling this grand event; he and his father had just had a great row.**

**Everything that night had gone as they had desired. They had been able to find the cask containing the special ale for the toast, open it, and pour in the powder undetected.**

**The pranksters had attended the feast. Malakiah certainly had had to be there to sit at the High Table. When Archtheocrat Tamar Horsewood had offered the toast, however, the pranksters one and all had been careful to appear to drink only. Then they had watched delighted as the agent had begun its vile effect.**

**Despite Luthius’ claim, not everyone who had drunk the powder had been affected; what was more, those seated at the High Table had coincidentally received their beverage from a different barrel than the rest of the feasters. However, among those who had received the powder and were affected, the results were exactly as the pranksters had anticipated.**

**Some present had most unceremoniously and immediately raced toward the rows of privies. Only the first ones, however, had been able to get inside. The rest of the people, in abject distress, had done whatever they could. Men had soiled their breeches; women had ruined their gowns. Malakiah had noticed his mother’s older sister, Aunt Nomi, among the unhappy women. Her plight had brought no feelings of sympathy from him; Aunt Nomi was always stuffy and putting on airs.**

**The sudden flight from the table had effectively broken up the feast. The perpetrators of the misdeed had been later identified when a note was found affixed to the door of the Town Watch’s building stating, “Drink up, people of Garend! We have proudly spiked the ale for the toast at the duke’s festival for you. Wait to see what we render next! The Shadowlurkers.”**

**This note had been Olaf’s idea. Malakiah, when he had heard of it, had much disapproved of its posting.**

**The duke, Captain Baylor, and the captain of the Town Watch had met to decide what they could do to identify and apprehend those responsible. They had had, however, no clues. Malakiah, who had heard his father discuss the matter with Baylor, had been grateful for that. He had begun to hope that he could now persuade the others not to do any more pranks. They might not be so fortunate to escape undetected the third time.**

**Olaf, however, had had one last prank in mind. This one involved, he had explained to Malakiah and the others, disrupting a ceremony in the temple of Adonai by unleashing a horde of cats and dogs. The animals’ fighting would undoubtedly cause chaos, but hardly be as vile as causing people to soil themselves. Malakiah had had to agree and half-heartily consented to participate if this one was the last prank. Olaf had promised.**

**They had decided upon the temple service they would disrupt. One group led by Kame had been chosen to secure stray dogs and place them in boxes. Another group by Olaf had elected to round up stray cats. All the crates containing these animals were then hidden behind the temple’s altar in a backroom. They had drawn straws for who would release the animals, and Malakiah had pulled the short one. Once Malakiah had been selected, Kame loyally agreed to accompany him.**

**Malakiah, Kame, Olaf, and the others had carried the boxes into the back room through a seldom-used side door. Then they had placed them to open facing the room’s only door.**

**Olaf said, “The method is simple, my lord. You and Kame wait until you hear the words of the ceremony’s opening chant. Then open these boxes. When the animals come out, herd them toward the door. Next, release the dogs. They will give chase and cause the commotion.”**

**Malakiah nodded. “Understood. And then, when the fighting starts, we follow the worshippers out.” Kame nodded as well.**

**“I am glad that I will not be in this temple when those skunks let loose their smell,” one of the other boys said.**

**Malakiah froze and looked at the boy who had spoken. “‘Skunks,’ you said?”**

**“Yes, my lord,” the boy said. “Olaf obtained them—knew you not?”**

**“Olaf!” Malakiah cried, turning to confront his rival. “What means this trickery? We agreed on cats and dogs—not skunks! Skunks will cause a stink that will last for days, if not weeks! I forbid their use. We shall remove them from here at once!”**

**“Forbid what you want, Your Lordship. The prank goes on as planned.”**

**“Olaf, I order you and the others to remove these boxes immediately.”**

**“Or what? Will you call the civil authorities down upon us? We are all miscreants together. You cannot betray us without betraying yourself!”**

**“I will not take any part in this prank.”**

**“Then suffer the fate of the craven,” said Olaf. Suddenly, he had slammed the door, and as Malakiah had reached for it, he had heard the bar moved into place on the other side.**

**He and Kame had been trapped and faced eventual discovery. They would have to find a means of escape.**

**They had looked around the room. There had been a window. Fortunately, it had been unlocked; unfortunately, it had been only small enough for the more slightly built Kame to squeeze through.**

**“Kame,” Malakiah said, “through that window quickly.”**

**“I will not leave you behind, Mal.”**

**“You will not be. Go around the temple and then come back inside through the side door. You can then unlock the door to this room.”**

**“Verily. I shall be back in a few minutes.”**

**Kame had crawled out. However, a member of the Town Watch, Elithus, had seen Kame pass out the window. This constable had chased Kame who had eluded him. Then Elithus had returned to the temple and had found the Archtheocrat Tamar Horsewood in his office. Once the constable had described what he had seen—a youth escaping out a window—he and the archtheocrat had immediately investigated. They had found the back room’s door barred; when they had opened it, there had been Malakiah. Elithus and the archtheocrat had questioned him. Malakiah had claimed he had seen a gang of youths carrying boxes into this room. He had confronted them, and they had shoved him into this room and locked him in. One had been left in the room, but had escaped through the window. He had thanked them for rescuing him.**

**Elithus had questioned him further. “My lord, knew you any of the others? Were there any you recognized?”**

**“No,” Malakiah had lied. “I knew none of them.”**

**“Have you any idea what mischief they were about, my lord?”**

**“No idea. But their bringing boxes into the temple—such could not have been any good.”**

**“Verily. I would certainly wager on mischief.” He had knocked hard on top of one of the boxes. Startled barking erupted from it. “Dogs, obviously.” He had gone over to the other set of boxes and kicked one hard. No sounds had come for it. “I shall have to open this one up then.”**

**“That would be ill-advised, Constable. It contains skunks, and, if they are alarmed, they could spray, and their stink would overwhelm us all.”**

**Elithus had paused and looked hard at Malakiah. “Skunks, you say, my lord?”**

**“Verily.”**

**“My lord,” he had asked, his face grim, “how would you know this box’s contents? There is no obvious way you could. There is no way you could, unless…”**

**The youth had known then he had spoken too much. He had tried to bluster his way out.**

**“Constable, I have nothing else to say! I only wish to leave now.”**

**Had it not been for the archtheocrat, Malakiah would have escaped—the constable could hardly have ordered him to remain. Tamar Horsewood, however, had placed himself in the doorway. Then he had stood there, staring at the youth. Malakiah had felt very small.**

**He had looked up at the archtheocrat and asked, “Your Most Divineness, may I leave now? This whole affair has been most upsetting. I think not that I can assist you any further.”**

**“Malakiah Defakiran,” the archtheocrat had said to him solemnly, “I have known you since the day you were born. I recall when your parents called me to Castle Graystone to bless you on the day of your birth about sixteen years ago. I know that you are not perfect—none of us who profess to follow the teaching of Shem-adonti could claim such. I know further you have been less than faithful in your devotion to our Lord in recent years. Nonetheless, I would know now whether you have been truthful in what you have told us in this matter here. Therefore, swear to me and before Adonai that you have no involvement in this matter beyond what you have said. Swear such, and I will give you leave to depart. Otherwise, I charge you to confess to the true nature of how you have participated in this matter. Pray take not this matter lightly. Adonai will judge for any falsity. What say you, my son?”**

**Malakiah had found the decision that he had had to make the hardest one in his life. He had known either way he answered, he would deeply regret it. After standing before His Most Divineness for what seemed an eternity, he had admitted his involvement with the others. Tamar Horsewood had looked shocked; then, he had drawn himself up and said, “Malakiah, as Adonai commands, I forgive you. Yet you must now suffer the consequences of your actions. Constable Elithus, take him into your custody.”**

**Malakiah had been turned over to the Town Watch.**

**The captain of the Town Watch had known the civil courts would not have had any authority to try Malakiah. Instead, he had handed the boy over to his father along with a lengthy legal disposition stating the charges against him. The captain had, however, previously extensively questioned Malakiah about the Shadowlurkers. Malakiah had refused to mention any of the others.**

**Malakiah, confined to his room, had been terrified. With his behavior over the last few years and now this discovery, he had had no idea what would become of him. *Would his father hurl him into the dungeon? Or even disown him?* His mother had come to him and wept over his plight, but told him, sadly, his father alone would decide what his future would be.**

**Finally, his father had announced his decision—that Malakiah, to redeem himself and show one and all that he was fit to be the heir apparent, must become a knight of the Perencian Order. His first reaction to his father’s declaration had been utter numbness followed by a long period of total despair.**

***Now*, Malakiah thought sadly, *the joint of meat is burnt, the bride and groom have retired to their nuptial chamber for the night*. “What is done cannot be undone,” as the adage went. Within a matter of days, barring that a rider came charging up from Garend with a message from his father saying that Baylor’s orders were revoked and that he could return home—the chance of which the youth felt was about the same as that of Baylor marrying an ogress and becoming the proud father of twins—he would be undergoing knightly training in Suena. He felt miserable!**

**He heard Baylor calling. He turned and saw the captain beckoning him. The other guards were crowded around him. The youth walked over.**

**“Thank you for joining us, my lord,” Baylor said. “I would like to tell you and the others that, these next few days, we will be going through the western pass of the Peridian Mountains to reach Malva. This passage can be hazardous. We must be ever prepared for an attack. Always have swords at ready and shields in hand. And at night, two will be on guard duty at all times. No one is exempt from standing watch.” All the guards turned toward Malakiah to see his reaction.**

**Malakiah’s response was most vocal. “Captain Baylor,” he said, “I protest. I am the son of His Grace, the duke. I refuse to camp out. I will not sleep on the ground as should a common soldier. You will find me proper accommodations each night.”**

**All the guards turned back to face the captain.**

**Baylor favored Malakiah with a level stare and a smile that bore no warmth. “My lord,” he said, “I will still use that title for it is yours by right and birth. But let me state one thing most clearly. On this journey, I am in charge—not you. I have been empowered by His Grace, the duke, your father, to see you safely to Suena. However, your father has left to my discretion how I accomplish that charge. I decree there will be no beds until we reach Suena. We will camp out, sleep on the ground, and cook our meals over a campfire. That is my decision. And, my lord, I believe you have just volunteered for two shifts of guard duty tonight. Most generous of you, my lord. The men appreciate it.”**

**“Captain, I…” the youth began.**

**“Perhaps I hear you volunteering for the entire night instead, my lord?”**

**Malakiah, realizing he had no sword to fight with, fell silent. He looked down, not able to stand the amused faces of the guards. *I will remember this indignity,* he swore to himself.**

**“I thought not. To continue, men, this pass will take us several days to travel through…”**

**\*\*\* Part 2: The Squire**

**Chapter 12**

**THE PURSUIT OF**

**THE CHARTREUSE GRYPHON**

**HE JOSEF JOHNAM INSTITUTE AND THE PRESTANRICK TANZALLIUM UNIVERSITY ARE THE NATION OF PERENCIA’S MOST NOTABLE UNIVERSITIES AND ARE BOTH LOCATED IN SUENA. They have existed alongside each other without conflict for over seven hundred years despite the two schools’ differing educational philosophies. This close association has proven most beneficial. Their renowned faculties have cultivated long and amicable working relationships, allowing instructors to transfer from teaching at one school to the other, or, in rare instances, to holding a position at both. The universities’ respected administrators frequently sit together on community boards and often hold seminars to discuss mutual interests.**

**The relationship between the two schools’ students, however, is quite antagonistic. Whenever those from one school meet some from the other, they always exchange taunts; occasionally, they even brawl. Each group further regularly vandalizes the grounds of the others’ schools. The members of Suena’s Town Watch and the schools’ administrators continuously try to prevent such disturbances and property destruction. And the townspeople despair whenever they see the damage caused by these pranks.**

**One aspect of this constant conflict which none objects to, however, is the schools’ annual week-long competition, The Pursuit of the Chartreuse Gryphon, held during the middle part of the first month of spring. Students from both schools, along with many residents of Suena, gather in the Amphitheater each of the five days to watch this spectacle of athletic challenges, demonstrations of skill, contests of the mind, and other events such as processions, parades, plays, and singing presentations. At its finish, whichever school is judged the victor earns the right to possess The Chartreuse Gryphon—a large, green-colored plaster statue set on a wooden platform with poles to lift and carry it around with—for a year. The victorious school then bears its trophy back to its home grounds in a triumphal procession. And, in those years when the winning school scores a decisive victory and not a close one, the bearers of the gryphon will not have to worry the members of the other school will attempt to steal it in route and carry it off to their own.**

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***Eleventh day of the first month of spring, 2122***

**The new year had begun. The long weeks of wintery rain had finally ended. Farmers had started planting. The rivers crossing the plain of Suena, already full, began rising even more from the snow’s melt in the mountains. The norias by the streams were busily turning to fill the aqueducts leading to the universities and the reservoirs intended to hold the water for agricultural use. High-water levels currently slowed travel along the Vernado River.**

**This month was also the final one of the winter quarter for the Institute and the University. In both schools, students labored to complete their coursework and prepare for their final examinations. And, in between these tasks, they looked forward even more to the upcoming Chartreuse Gryphon competition. The townspeople likewise readied themselves for the onslaught this yearly event brought upon the town. The Town Watch prepared by taking on more men.**

**For Malakiah, Scottius, Jefhian, and Hathian, this year’s Pursuit of The Chartreuse Gryphon would be the first one they would be able to witness—the previous year’s they had missed because of their obligations at the Academy. They knew classes would not conflict with the contest’s events. Just as at the Academy Qualifying Examinations caused classes to be canceled, at both the Institute and the University, The Chartreuse Gryphon competitions did the same during its five days.**

**Despite being students at the Institute, however, Malakiah and the cousins were forbidden to participate in the competition—much to their annoyance. Malakiah knew he could have excelled in the obstacle course. And Scottius, Jefhian, and Hathian knew they would have dominated wrestling. Yet the Academy rules—which Warden Haydian himself had told to all members of the Academy attending either the Institute or the University on an earlier Adonai’s Day—expressly stated that none of them could participate in any events.**

**“Furthermore,” the warden had stated firmly, “none of you shall perform any prank or act of vandalism such as those in which students of the Institute or University are known to partake. Adonai protect any of you—from me—should I determine that you have been involved in such goblinshines!” His glare told them such was no idle promise.**

**Then he had continued to tell them in what capacity they would serve during the competition.**

**“Frequently, Squires, the students and others watching the contest tend to become unruly and prone to fight. Our duty then becomes to assist said Town Watch to control the crowds. You will learn more about that later.” He then gave all of his listeners a grim smile. “It may be a long and tedious chore, Squires, but at least you will be able to watch the events every day without paying admission. I know that would make me a very happy man. And, if you want to keep me one, such better gladden your hearts as well. Now, have any of you questions?”**

**“Warden Haydian,” asked Malakiah. “Some students building the competition’s obstacle course requested me to advise them on such construction. Am I permitted to assist them?”**

**“Squire, you may help design and construct any obstacles on which *both* schools’ participants will compete. But not in building a training course for one school only.”**

**“Warden Haydian,” spoke up Scottius, “I have been asked to train students of the Institute in wrestling. May I so instruct them?”**

**Haydian shook his head. “Should anyone ask you to demonstrate holds, moves, or defenses, you may—provided you demonstrate such instruction to *any* who may ask you regardless of his school! To impart information to members of only one school would be considered as showing partiality! And such you *will* avoid!!”**

**The warden answered several more questions and then dismissed them.**

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**Malakiah and the cousins left the chapel after the morning service on the morning of the eleventh. As was their norm, they were heading to the library to study. However, this morning, they noticed—all over the courtyard and around the reflecting pool—students busily working on projects that could only be for The Chartreuse Gryphon competition.**

**Malakiah and the cousins strolled around, observing individuals building floats to carry in processionals and parades; creating posters, handbills, decorations, or banners; making costumes or uniforms; rehearsing songs or short plays; or working on any of the other myriad things deemed necessary to celebrate the contest. Malakiah and those with him were asked several times if they wished to help, but they declined, explaining that the Academy forbade them from participating. They then sought out the library which they found nearly empty.**

**Malakiah, the cousins, and all other squires at their first Chartreuse Gryphon competition soon discovered few students would occupy the benches of the lecture halls during the week before the event. Such absenteeism was accepted. Accordingly, the teachers, when they would have had a lecture, gave to whoever showed up reading assignments and then permitted them either to study or to leave. Usually, Malakiah and the other squires would stay, glad to gain this extra study time.**

**The next afternoon and the one following, Malakiah and the cousins, atypically, had matters to attend to regarding the competition. After making brief appearances at their classes to learn their assignments, they rode their horses across town, over the bridge crossing the Vernado River, and then down the second street on the left to the Amphitheater, entering through the service corridor.**

**There Malakiah spent several hours both days advising groups from the schools on how to construct the obstacles for the competition’s course. The Institute’s and the University’s students knew of his formidable reputation on the Academy’s course and so valued his expertise. And he was pleased to help them however he could. When the course was completed on the second day, he challenged all there to run it against him, promising to buy a pint of ale to any who could best him. None could.**

**Close by to the obstacle course on the wrestling square, Scottius, Jefhian, and Hathian, on these same two days, served as advisors as well. They discovered the first day, however, although they had been asked to demonstrate wrestling techniques, they had also been invited for another reason—the largest students from both schools were most eager to try their grips on Scottius. And he, once he had discerned they held this foolish desire, was most willing to oblige them. One burly fellow after another went against Scottius, and each suffered a swift defeat. Despite their aching muscles and bruises, some thought they might be more successful competing against Jefhian or Hathian. Again, none were. Malakiah watched these matches when he could and enjoyed them.**

**Finally, after spending a couple of hours defeating all those naïve enough to challenge them, the cousins switched to instruction, which they continued for the rest of the first afternoon and the entire second one. They were dismayed to observe those competing had only minimal knowledge of wrestling. Scottius, Jefhian, and Hathian, however, had insufficient time to give them any lengthy instruction. They, therefore, limited their teaching to only a few basic holds and defenses. By the end of the second afternoon, they were pleased their pupils had made some progress.**

**Besides the regular wrestling, the competition featured mud wrestling. A student named Affred said he would be participating in that contest and asked the cousins if one of them could offer him any assistance.**

**Jefhian rolled his eyes; he exchanged looks with his cousins. “Verily not! That event requires no skill. It consists only of buffoonery and the trait of slipperiness! And as such is intended solely for amusement! It is not worthy of our instruction. A pig—a creature native to mud—could emerge the champion of that contest.”**

**Affred smiled at Jefhian’s protests. “Then perhaps I must find a pig to instruct me—I can only hope he will not be too much of a boar!”**

**Jefhian groaned. “How dare you subject me to such *pun-ishment*!”**

**He threw a mock punch at Affred’s head who ducked the blow with a smile.**

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***Thirteenth day of the first month of spring, 2122***

**That evening, at dinner in the Institute’s dining room, Malakiah and the cousins discussed their surprise the two groups of students, despite their well-known animosity, had been able to work together within the Amphitheater. Too bad, they all agreed, such could not become standard behavior.**

**Later that night, Malakiah was walking alone back to The Belly of the Beast. As he passed the opening to an alleyway, he heard a scuffle within. He knew the safest and prudent course would be to continue. But he also knew that such was not the vocation of a knight—one who was supposed to offer help whenever needed. He shielded his eyes to adjust them to the reduced light in the alley and then ventured in cautiously.**

**What he found surprised him. In the dark, narrow lane between the two buildings, he discovered his friend from the hostel, Gregian, facing three husky individuals whom Malakiah recognized from the Institute. The three slowly circled Gregian, their fists ready, looking for an opening. Gregian, similarly poised, was prepared to meet any attack.**

**“Gregian,” Malakiah cried out. Then he addressed his friend’s three assailants. “Gadreel! Aslam! Dumeas! What be the purpose of this fight?”**

**“Well met, Squire,” answered Gadreel. Despite Malakiah’s arrival, none of the fighters relaxed their stance. “You have arrived just in time to help us strike a blow for our school.”**

**“What mean you? Why seek you to contend with Gregian?”**

**“Contend with him? Verily not! We seek instead to injure this one who has dung for brains.”**

**“For what reason? How has he harmed you?”**

**“He has not harmed us—at least, not yet. But he would compete against us. And most likely score many points on his school’s behalf. That outcome we surely desire not. Therefore, we would injure him to prevent such an annoyance.”**

**“And I declare you goblins shall not,” snarled Gregian. “Depart from me now or I thrash you and leave you all to sleep the night on the cobblestones of this alley.”**

**“Boastful words,” said Aslam, sneering. “You could hardly best the three of us. Now, think you can prevail against four?” He nodded his head in Malakiah’s direction.**

**“Most true,” added Dumeas. He threw a wild punch Gregian easily avoided. “Surrender now and we will gently break one leg—only.”**

**“Verily so,” said Gadreel. Now he turned and addressed Malakiah. “Come, fellow member of the Institute. Aid your brothers in preventing this simple-minded cur from that accursed University from competing against us. With your help, we four could easily lay hold of him. And deal with him! What say you?”**

**Malakiah quickly assessed the situation. Gregian was a large fellow and quite strong. Most likely, he could easily hold his own against anyone or perhaps two of his current assailants. Yet he would be at a disadvantage against all three. If Malakiah joined with Gadreel and the others, Gregian would be overwhelmed and at their mercy.**

**Nonetheless, even before Gadreel had requested his aid, Malakiah had known what course he must take—there was none other open to him. He darted between the three to stand next to Gregian. The realization of what his action meant brought forth a barrage of oaths.**

**“I say ‘nay’ to your foul intent, Gadreel, Aslam, and Dumeas,” he proclaimed. “My honor as a knight forbids me from allowing you to work such mischief. And I so swear the only way you shall perform such injury to him is after you have bested us both.” He nodded and patted Gregian’s shoulder. “I have your back, my friend; let your fight become mine.”**

**Gregian smiled. “I wondered which side you would come in upon. Have I lately said I am glad we met?”**

**Gadreel and the other two glared at Malakiah. “Traitor,” growled Gadreel. “How can you help one such as him? Whose side are you on?”**

**Malakiah smiled back. “I am neither on the side of the Institute nor that of the University. I am on the side where Adonai and the Knighthood would have me be—that of the just! I will suffer none injured for the reason you intend—to gain an unfair advantage! I stand in opposition to your purpose—as I would to any who would attempt the same. Verily, if Gregian himself should later wish to employ such underhanded methods on any as you would now, I would oppose him just as strongly.”**

**“I thank you, friend Mal,” retorted Gregian, “for that lengthy explanation. Might I also mention you make long-winded speeches during a fight as would a knight in a tale told by a bard?”**

**“Now,” said Malakiah, ignoring the barb, “your design to injure Gregian cannot succeed. Therefore, leave swiftly. Else, most assuredly, you shall find the floor of this alley most uncomfortable to wake up upon.”**

**Gadreel snarled. “Verily not—we shall pound your heads on the stones beneath us.”**

**“Permit not your mouth to issue a promise your body cannot deliver!” replied Malakiah calmly.**

**Gadreel and the other two met this taunt with glares. Malakiah thought he had cowed them. Then, with shouts of defiance, Aslam and Dumeas, their fists raised, charged at them with Gadreel behind.**

**Malakiah and Gregian, standing back to back, exchanged blows with the three for several minutes. Then Gregian whispered to his partner between swings. “Mal, some advice my uncle—an experienced tavern fighter—gave me once. When you must fight several opponents, you concentrate on knocking them down quickly until you have just one still standing. Then that last one you put down *for keeps* before another gets up off the floor. That way you can reduce your opponents *quickly*.”**

**“Most useful information. Let us use it!”**

**Within five more minutes, the two had their opponents dispatched. Aslam had been rendered unconscious; the other two just lay there rubbing bruised jaws. Both Malakiah and Gregian had only received scratches and later would discover they had sore ribs.**

**Malakiah and Gregian left the alley and their vanquished foes behind and proceeded back to their hostel. As they walked, Gregian watched for any other Institute students lurking about.**

**“Thanks for my rescue, Mal,” he said. “May I offer to buy you a pint of ale on some future date?”**

**“Verily so. But at what establishment could you share such a pint with me?”**

**Gregian shrugged. “Yes, that would be a problem. Perhaps I will have to settle for staking you a meal at the hostel.”**

**“That too would be most welcome—but may I choose which meal? Sometimes the fare at our hostel is somewhat of an adventure.”**

**Gregian smiled. “Mal, is the fare our hostel provides ever anything such as that mystery roast which they served to you as cadets in the dining hall of the Fortress?”**

**Malakiah chuckled. “So that muck is so *infamous* even you outside of the Academy have heard tales of its delights? Verily, Gregian, naught in all Perencia—or even Tarn—can compare with that dish. Its recipe could only have been obtained from a she-troll—who was happy to surrender it!”**

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***Fifteenth day of the first month of spring, 2122***

**The Adonai’s Day two days later would not be a typical one for most Academy members. Many of the younger cadets would be away from Suena this day learning about cave castle defenses with the instructor Sir Arkiman—just as Malakiah, the cousins, and Whithus had undergone a year ago. Those older cadets who had had this instruction the previous year—ones such as Whithus—for them the day was typical. They were organized into squads and marched out of the Fortress to perform agricultural or construction work. Atypically, because, on this day they were led by third-year squires and available knight candidates.**

**Malakiah and other first- and second-year squires who attended classes at the Institute and the University and who typically would have led the cadets, however, had been informed through a circulated message that, at the hour which they would customarily have met at the Fortress, they should instead assemble inside the Amphitheater. There, they were told, they would receive further instructions. Accordingly, Malakiah and the others had stayed in Suena on the night of the fourteenth, attended a morning service at the Institute’s chapel on the fifteenth, and then headed across town to the Amphitheater. The total number of squires assembled was about fifty. Malakiah was surprised to discover Santos present.**

**“And what causes you to be here, high and mighty Knight Candidate so soon-to-be?” Malakiah asked his friend with mock reverence. “You should be preparing for your grand quest. Studying maps and charts. Attending to a dozen other minute tasks. Have you somehow displeased your illustrious uncle, causing him to sentence you to this forlorn duty?”**

**“Verily not, you lowliest of squires,” Santos answered. “I volunteered for this duty. I had to make sure you would not mess it up too badly!”**

**Looking about, Malakiah noticed Drakos was absent. He hoped that cur was working on his academic project this day instead of leading cadets in a work project. However, if he was directing one today, Malakiah could only hope Whithus was not in his squad and being abused by that copper-plated, self-inflated tyrant.**

**While they waited, some of them idly walked around the arena’s floor, looking at the equipment. Several expressed to any who would listen—or pretend to—their annoyance at being forbidden to participate in the events. Of more interest were the senior squires who related experiences from previous competitions. Malakiah, to his annoyance, saw Iland, Dreg, and Darrell were present as well.**

**Finally, three members of the Town Watch arrived. One of them—tall, lean, and bald-headed—pointed at the second level of a section and ordered the squires to take seats. When they were all seated, he stood on the walkway below and addressed them.**

**“A pleasant good morning to you, Squires,” he said. “I thank you all for coming here today—as if such was of your own volition.” This remark evoked but a momentary chuckle. “I am Warden Walthus; I am in charge of the Town Watch for the city of Suena. And, as I recognize none of you, it pleases me to know that, in the performance of my duties, I have never had to encounter any of you.”**

**He paused and gestured to the two men who had arrived with him and now stood off to one side. “The men are my assistants—Sergeants Reynard and Danae. They will supervise you during your five days of watching the crowds at the competition. Any questions or problems you have, you shall direct them into their awaiting ears.”**

**Reynard and Danae nodded.**

**Warden Walthus paused briefly, took a deep breath, and then continued. “Essentially, Squires, your primary duties during the competition shall be to walk along this walkway on which I am now standing, remaining visible to deter anyone with a desire to cause a disturbance from acting upon such. We hope our presence will quell any annoying behaviors before they start. Yet, we may not rely on expectations!**

**“We know from experience most fights break out between students from the two schools. Accordingly, years ago, we devised a strict seating arrangement. Look about you, Squires, at the sections here in the Amphitheater. During the competition, all spectators will sit in the second level of seats—the same ones you are in now—or the level above. Students from the Institute shall have their seats in the four sections on the Amphitheater's northern side. We name that area the red quarter. Students from the University shall have the southern side or the blue quarter. The western side or the green quarter and the eastern side or the yellow quarter—which we are now in—are for the townspeople. This method we have to separate the students we refer to as ‘dividing and conquering.’**

**“You may wonder why the first level seats, which are closer to the events and thus preferable, are not being used. Verily, they are not used in the red and blue quarters to keep the students from the events. Such prevents possible interference. In the yellow and green quarters, however, these seats are used to host the competition's non-athletic events. There is no need to discuss them now—you will learn of such later!**

**“Now, Squires, you have been advised of our two main methods to prevent fighting—keeping the schools separated and having individuals—that is you—in place who represent a visible barrier to such activity. Still, fights can occur within any group or between groups for any cause. You all know most well what happens when you mix ample amounts of ale, hot tempers, and disappointing results of sporting events. Harsh words are uttered, shoving matches follow them, and, finally, fists are thrown, erupting into a fight. A small battle between two people we can manage. However, a distinct danger is that once one begins, it may spread and involve more people. This occurrence we cannot permit! If we let any fight grow beyond a manageable level to become a riot, Adonai help us!**

**“Therefore, Squires, your primary responsibility is to stop any fighting before it begins. If not, before it can spread. So, keep your eyes on the crowd. If you or your fellow—you shall all walk this walkway in groups of two—see what looks like a fight about to start, arrive there swiftly. Verbally confront the potential assailants. Order them not to fight. Warn them most firmly. They are permitted two warnings from you. If they require your attention a third time, you summon a member of the Town Watch to affect their removal from the Amphitheater. Should they fight and you can persuade them to cease, they may stay provided they fight not again. If they resume fighting, summon a member of the Town Watch to see to their removal. If you must physically restrain them from fighting or they attack you, they shall immediately be obliged to leave the Amphitheater.”**

**Walthus, seeing a raised hand, said, “Yes, Squire?”**

**“What means, Warden Walthus,” Jefhian asked, “‘physically restrain them’? Are we permitted to carry swords or the like?”**

**Walthus shrugged. “Despite you squires’ expertise in handling such, during your days on duty here, you shall not be permitted to possess *lethal* weapons. Such is the theocracy's decision, and, therefore, I will hardly endeavor to dispute it. You will instead use a tool which we shall provide you. Sergeant Reynard shall give you further information.”**

**The warden turned and nodded to his assistant. He then took a seat.**

**Reynard moved to stand before the squires. As he did, he lifted over his head a stout stick about three and one-half feet long. The top third of it was wrapped with what appeared to be a long, thick strip of coarse wool.**

**“A pleasant day to you, Squires. I hold in my hand what we call a ‘persuader.’ Each of you shall carry one while on duty. Its function should be simple to discern. You use it to ‘persuade’ someone to mind after he had refused to obey orders and now threatens to or has become violent. It is designed to hurt without necessarily injuring. We shall shortly provide you with instructions on when and how to employ it. And, hopefully, we shall not corrupt all those techniques which your weapons teacher, Sir Rodian, had labored so hard to instill within you. Warden Walthus has told you you shall work with a partner. Pray choose one now. I request all of you squires who have performed this duty before to stand.”**

**Slightly more than a third of the group—twenty total—arose.**

**Reynard frowned. “Are there any more squires coming tomorrow not present today?”**

**“Verily—about ten,” volunteered Randius. “They are supervising cadets today in work projects. They are all senior squires—surely they will have performed this duty before.”**

**“Their absence is most inconvenient,” Reynard said. “Nonetheless, we must work with what we have. You squires standing—pick someone inexperienced to be your partner. Once they have done so, those of you left temporarily pair with another for training today. Tomorrow, when the remaining squires get here, we shall endeavor to ensure each inexperienced squire pairs with an experienced one. Now, choose and assemble on the arena floor. Your training on using the ‘persuader’ awaits!”**

**Partners were swiftly selected. Santos picked Malakiah, saying, “We might as well get used to working together.” Then they all went down the stairs to the arena floor to join the two awaiting instructors. Warden Walthus took his leave at this point.**

**Reynard and Danae divided the fifty squires into two groups—one of twenty-six and one of twenty-four. Danae assumed charge of the smaller one which contained Malakiah, Santos, and the cousins. He first instructed his charges to form two lines facing each other. Then he walked between them, handing out ‘persuaders’ to each person. He paused when he stood before Scottius.**

**“Most truly,” he said, eying the massive squire as he handed him his stick, “had we a few more such as you we would require a lot less such as your fellows.”**

**“Possibly so,” grunted Scottius. He looked at what he had just been given. “What would you have me use this for? A toothpick, perhaps?”**

**“Perhaps you can offer it to your opponent to give him a more even chance. Now, pay attention to my instruction and you shall learn. And, once you have, try not to break the stick—or whomever you strike with it!”**

**Danae chuckled as he continued down the line.**

**Once everyone had their sticks, Danae told the squires to spend several minutes limbering up. Most squires practiced their various sword-fighting forms, alternating between attacking and defending.**

**Danae next explained the persuader’s usage. It was not—except in an extreme situation—intended for hitting persons to render them unconscious. Instead, its wielder was to strike at a person’s arms to numb them or at one’s legs to make him temporarily unable to stand. Danae also indicated where to hit the highly unruly for maximum effectiveness: the center of the chest, the stomach, the groin, or the upper back.**

**The watchman had the squires practice on each other, telling them to strive for accuracy but also for gentle contact. At least for now, he said. The squires attempted to follow his directions. Those who inadvertently struck too hard risked painful hits when their partners later responded.**

**They practiced attacks on each other until the midday hour. Then their instructors gave them an hour’s break for rest and to eat when their lunch arrived in a cart from the Fortress. In it were baskets of fruits, rolls, sausages, chunks of cheese, and two kegs of cider. All ate most heartily.**

**After lunch, Reynard and Danae distributed whistles. These, they told their charges, were for signaling each other and the members of the Town Watch.**

**“Should you see a fight or what looks like one about to start, one of the two should indicate such by blowing his whistle *twice*. Then proceed immediately to the scene to address the situation. Whoever’s group is nearby and hears the whistle blown, one of you in that second group also blow your whistle *twice,* and then *both* of you head toward the first sound to assist the first group there. The second group should initially stay back and observe the first one to avoid provoking the situation. However, should the second group observe a fight occurring and the first group needs assistance, a member of the second group should request further help by blowing his whistle *three times twice*. That is the signal for all squires and members of the Town Watch in nearby sections to arrive to assist in handling the situation, which, by this point, is presumably a large fight about to erupt.”**

**“How many groups of squires in a section will there be?” Malakiah asked.**

**“We have eighteen sections in this arena. Each school is allotted four. That leaves ten—five on each side—for the townspeople. We anticipate having sixty squires. Accordingly, we shall place two groups—four squires—in each section set aside for the schools. The remaining fourteen groups or twenty-eight squires will be spread across the other ten sections. There are fewer squires per section among the townspeople because we expect them to be less troublesome. There will also be twenty members of the Town Watch in the arena plus four watch leaders. The members of the Town Watch will be stationed wherever their leaders think they are most necessary.”**

**“We will be taking orders from them as well as you?”**

**Reynard shook his head. “From the regular members of the Watch—no. They will just work alongside you. And, hopefully, offer you useful advice. You should only take orders from the Watch leaders in an emergency—such as a full riot. I think such an occasion will be quite obvious should such occur. Adonai willing, it shall not!”**

**They practiced a few more hours with their persuaders. Then Reynard and Danae walked them through the sections of the Amphitheater and assigned them their areas for the next day. Santos, Malakiah, and Randius, who awaited an experienced partner, were given a section for townspeople in the southwestern part of the arena. It was located next to the quarter for University students. Santos, based on his experiences from previous years, told Malakiah and Randius their section would most likely be a peaceful one.**

**“Exactly what we want,” said Randius. Next, he quoted for humorous effect, “‘It is good to live in peaceful times.’”**

**The others chuckled at this observation.**

**After Reynard and Danae had given them all their assignments and had advised them what time they were to arrive tomorrow for the first day of the competition, they dismissed the squires.**

**As they still had several hours before any of them needed to return to either the Fortress or their respective schools, Santos idly suggested they all visit the Bathhouse to clean up. He was not surprised Malakiah approved of this offer. He was, however, caught unaware when the cousins and several others cheered his suggestion as well.**

**\*\*\* Part 3: The Knight Candidate**

**Chapter 21**

**MALAKIAH’S QUEST**

**HE QUEST CHOSEN FOR A CANDIDATE TO EARN HIS KNIGHTHOOD IN THE PERENCIAN ORDER IS SELECTED BY THE KNIGHTS COUNCIL WHICH EVALUATES THE POTENTIAL CANDIDATE AND STRIVES TO PICK AN ORDEAL THAT WILL DEMONSTRATE HIS STRENGTHS. The process can be as intricate and convoluted as any affair described by the political writer Niccolo Bernadi. Often the Council’s favorites will receive routine quests while non-preferred ones will be assigned harder challenges. Candidates in the bad graces of the Council will be set up to fail by being given nearly impossible tasks. Sometimes a high-ranking relative or patron will petition the Knights Council to assign his charge a specific or hard task so he may prove himself.**

**Malakiah’s patron, Sir Heddrick, the Duke of Suena, was the Grandmaster of the Perencian Order and thus the head of the Council; his father, the Duke of the Emerald Valley, while not influential in the Perencian Order, was despised by none. Malakiah, therefore, was given what was perceived as an easy quest. However, fate intervened. His simple, although extensive, quest to a far land would turn out to be a harsh ordeal. And have far-reaching consequences none could have expected!**

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***Twenty-fourthday of the first month of summer, 2124***

**The Duke of Suena’s obligations as the Grandmaster of the Perencian Order of Knights revolved mainly around his attending meetings—either those in which he presided over as the Order’s Grandmaster or those he served as its representative. His duties in such meetings could extend from hearing petitions or grievances from the lowliest of citizens to his receiving orders for the Perencian Order from His Supreme Divineness, the high theocrat himself. What the duke obtained from such meetings he would then customarily delegate to a member of the Knights Council, Eramius his chief clerk, or some other aide to work upon. Only occasionally would His Grace write proposals, conduct research, or draw up reports himself.**

**Among the most prominent meetings Sir Heddrick attended were those involving the entire Knights Council. They were usually held monthly on the twenty-fourth day and took up the entire afternoon. The participants rarely found their proceedings dull. Their minutes were always reviewed and retained for future reference. Each member’s reports were listened to attentively when presented and their details later securitized. Indeed, in these meetings, everyone present strove to impress all others there with their efforts on behalf of their assigned committee’s area of influence. All knew their hopes of eventual Council advancement depended on their performance.**

**Today being the twenty-fourth and presently it being just a few minutes before the fifteenth hour, the duke and Eramius were in the duke’s office on the second floor of the Perencian Order of Knights building. His Grace sat at his desk, reviewing and editing his report. Eramius sat at one end of the long table on the other side of the room. Behind him, sitting on a bench with a narrow table before them, were six scribes with their quills, inkpots, and sheets of paper at ready. They all awaited the imminent arrival of the remaining members.**

**These other members—the three ranking knights of the Gold Order, the Silver Order, the Bronze Order, the Steel Order, and the one selected by the high theocrat to represent the Platinum Order—arrived promptly. The duke was known to be intolerant of unexcused tardiness. With them came four other clerks—one for each Order—bearing their papers and writing materials. Once the last had arrived, the duke took the grand chair at the unoccupied end of the table; the other knights took their customary seats.**

**The meeting began with the Council members voicing a long recitation, partly a pledge and mostly a prayer. The grandmaster’s report followed it. Sir Heddrick told his fellow knights of his activities since their last meeting. He related the civic functions he had attended, the defensive sites he had inspected, and other events. Of particular interest to all was his recent audience with the high theocrat; he briefly summarized the instructions His Supreme Divineness Theodosiusian II had had for the Perencian Order, saying their compete details were in his report all members would receive after the meeting.**

**The next report was the treasurer’s, presented by Sir Alderan Festgiven, the second representative of the Silver Order. Sir Alderan reported the Perencian Order’s investments were currently providing a healthy return, their lands and businesses generated a hefty income through the rental fees and percentages, and their farms and ranches promised substantial sales with the harvest in the next few months.**

**All present murmured their approval at these optimistic tidings.**

**The Council next had brought to its members’ attention those matters previously reviewed in previous meetings but remaining unresolved. Eramius read such items from a list. As one was mentioned, the head of the committee to whom it had been delegated would then present his verdict as to what should be done about it. These verdicts were voted upon by the four Orders. Approved ones were** **implemented. Rejected ones were discussed; following such, the matter was then returned to the original committee or assigned to a new one. Occasionally, a matter would just be dismissed as unworthy of further concern.**

**Next, the Council would consider new matters. Such items were similarly either accepted and implemented or relegated to committees for further study and recommendations. Among such matters this day were two letters from Santos recently arrived. The first one was his request from the Monastery of the Mystic Yudeas to send an expert in defensive fortifications. The Council disputed whether this letter should be treated as a request of the Perencian Order and therefore be considered by Sir Zephius Xanthwen, the third representative of the Gold Order, who headed Council’s Requests Committee; or, as the letter concerned someone needing defensive assistance, whether it should be delegated to Sir Bellisan de Motarin, the third representative of the Steel Order, as he headed the Council’s Defense Committee. Ultimately, they gave the matter to Sir Bellisan to consider.**

**The second letter was Santos’ request for the jewels for Vesta’s and Alleia’s ransom. Its reading by Eramius to the Council caused considerable amusement. To the duke, however, this request was not humorous at all but of grave concern; he advocated the Council to act most urgently upon it.**

**The letter was discussed at great length. The duke, with others supporting him, managed to convince all of its authenticity. The members all were well aware any traveler journeying through the region of Rama in Verritan risked being kidnapped.**

**Finally, the Council agreed it should send the requested jewels to Santos and Alderick in Rama; it could not, however, decide how to obtain them. To hasten matters, the duke volunteered to supply the diamonds himself. Then the Council began arguing on how to convey the gems. Eventually, as it decided from the tone of Santos’ letter, as the ransom was a routine although extended task, it would use the delivery at an opportunity for the quest of some appropriate knight candidate. Accordingly, it tasked Sir Benarian Lesthian, the Head or first representative of the Bronze Order and the one in charge of the Knight Candidate Supervision and Quests Committee, to select a suitable individual for the mission.**

**This decision completed the Council’s consideration of Santos’ second letter; it then heard other matters. After hearing the last new matter for review, the members took the half-hour meeting break. The eleven committee reports which comprised the rest of the meeting would be heard upon their return.**

**The duke sought out Sir Benarian during the break. He had a squire in mind for the mission to Rama whom he wanted his fellow council member to consider. Sir Benarian certainly knew the individual His Grace put forth, yet was unsure of his suitability. In deference to his grandmaster, though, the knight said he would undoubtedly investigate his qualifications. Sir Heddrick then suggested when they could meet to discuss the squire’s suitableness. Discerning the duke’s interest, Sir Benarian was convinced his recommendation for the Council as to whom they should send to Rama had been decided for him.**

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***Twenty-fourthday of the first month of summer, 2124***

**It had taken Malakiah several days to redraft his academic project into its final form; he finally finished its last page on the day following his assignment to buy supplies in the marketplace. He was elated on the morning of the twenty-fourth to march into the Administration Building of the Academy and hand his satchel containing his project to a clerk in the office of the Academy’s Council on Academic Projects. *Finally,* he thought, *after four years, he had finished the academic part of his knightly training.*  *Only the quest remained*. But, before he would have to fulfill that, he realized, surely a celebration with his friends was in order. He knew many at the Academy had thrown parties to celebrate achieving their knight candidatures; he had even been fortunate to attend a few of them. *Now*, he thought, *he shall have his own.***

**Malakiah planned to celebrate that very night at The Fiery Furnace tavern, having reserved a backroom there the week before. To this event, he had invited the cousins, Whithus, Vidar, Randius, and his four friends from the Institute. He had also asked his old friend Gregian from the University, hoping the fellow would chance entering an Institute-affiliated tavern. To Malakiah’s delight, Gregian sent word back he would attend—cautiously. Malakiah sought Kush to invite him but he could not find the little one.**

**Malakiah arrived early at the tavern to check if the room had been prepared properly. He found it was pleasantly lit with numerous candles and had a long table set with twelve places.**

**Gradually, his guests made their appearances. The cousins all arrived together, followed by Vidar and Randius. Malakiah required little catching up with the cousins as he saw them regularly at the Fortress, and they shared the Squires Quarters. Vidar and Randius related how they, too, had recently completed their academic projects and were now eagerly anticipating their quest assignments from the Knights Council.**

**Whithus arrived next; he had been in Suena most of the day receiving instruction at the Temple of Adonai and had there attended a service officiated by the high theocrat. Consequently, he was most eager to tell all he had experienced.**

**Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, and Deiniol entered the room as Whithus was finishing his story. Malakiah introduced them to Whithus, whom they had never met. After doing so, Malakiah noticed a hooded figure had entered the room. He challenged him.**

**“It is just me, Mal,” said Gregian, removing his head covering. “This establishment is enemy territory for me. I must be cautious here.”**

**“Most foully met, Gregian, you lowly denizen of the University,” said Deiniol with a smirk. “Hopefully, you wiped your feet before crossing the threshold of this tavern.”**

**“No need to,” returned Gregian, “although I suspect I shall have to when I depart.”**

**Malakiah was unsure whether the two’s exchange was just playful sparing or the start of a verbal altercation; nonetheless, he desired to keep everyone friendly here.**

**“Well met, Gregian; I am, at least, glad to have your presence here. And I insist all others here consider you welcome. This gathering shall remain friendly. If not, I shall ask Scottius to convince you all to be so.”**

**Scottius bared his teeth and growled. “Let me warn you—I have not eaten yet. Therefore, I am especially hungry!”**

**Malakiah nodded to Scottius and then glanced around the table. “Are my words understood?”**

**“Verily so, Mal,” said Deiniol. “We will consent to eat with Gregian—provided he remembers to use utensils.” He glared at Gregian.**

**“Most assuredly, I shall not forget to,” answered Gregian, glaring at Deiniol. “Let us also hope those of you from the Institute refrain from choking on their food because they cannot stop talking long enough to chew it properly.”**

**Verbal barbs continued to be exchanged for the next few minutes, but, gradually, the conversation turned friendlier when Malakiah pressed Gregian to tell them all about some of his creations as an armorer. Soon everyone was listening. None of them had known how complex an armored gauntlet was to craft, and Gregian did a most thorough job detailing how its intricate pieces were fabricated and attached.**

**Eventually, Malakiah, as the host, called for their meal. Again, as the last time he had been here, he noticed the buxom Zandra was their server. When she arrived with their drinks, she stood next to Deiniol to set them down. He leaned towards her. Malakiah suspected he planned to place a surreptitious kiss on her cheek and waited with amusement to witness her annoyed response. Instead, to his surprise, she merely turned her head and accepted it fully on her lips. She smiled back at him.**

**Seeing Malakiah’s astonished look, Deiniol explained. “Mal, I perceive you knew not the news. The lovely Zandra is now my intended.”**

**“My congratulations to you, Deiniol. Truly, I knew not.” He then addressed their server. “Pray tell me, Zandra, what has prompted you to grant your hand to this ‘randy goblin’ as you once so called him?”**

**“My realization he was truly more than such. And, his receiving a professorship at the Institute; it would please me to have such a titled and learned man as my own.” She took his hand in hers and squeezed it.**

**“Yes, Mal, she also reveals to you my other news. Soon I will be an instructor at the Institute. I hope, though, that is not the only reason I merited such quality ‘merchandise.’”**

**He gently patted Zandra’s behind. This time she merely frowned at him for taking such a liberty.**

**“And after all the times she swore none of us would ever share her *delights*,” sighed Azariah. “Who would have thought Deiniol would be the fortunate one? Pray describe how *delightful* it is to *inventory* her merchandise—that is, when you know, Deiniol.”**

**“Perhaps I could tell you now,” smirked Deiniol.**

**Malakiah glanced at Whithus; he looked shocked upon hearing Deiniol’s risqué comment.**

**“Verily, he most certainly *cannot*,” declared Zandra, slapping him softly on the head.**

**“Yes, she speaks truly; I cannot,” replied Deiniol, meekly. “Still, wanting to keeps me awake at night as I lie in my bed, *alone*.” He looked at her and sighed. Now, all at the table laughed. He beckoned her to come closer and kissed her again. “Such samples of the future pleasures to come must keep me contented.”**

**After allowing them a suitable time to savor their drinks, Zandra next brought out to each one a platter containing several meat-covered ribs coated with sauce, roasted potatoes, and two kinds of vegetables. They all eagerly set to. When he had finished gnawing on a bone, each one at the table casually hurled it to a pack of dogs chained in one corner of the room.**

**When they had all finished, Zandra cleared away the platters and brought them all another round of ale. Then the toasts to Malakiah began. Whithus gave the first one, asking Adonai to grant Malakiah His guidance and aid so his career as a knight would be long and honorable. Then each of the cousins offered one. Gregian followed theirs with a comical one, involving many jokes about knights and armor. Vidar and Randius gave standard toasts, wishing Malakiah much success. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah offered a joint toast in the form of a complex and interactive recital.**

**Altogether, it was probably the tribute Deiniol gave Malakiah all found the most memorable.**

**When Deiniol’s turn came, Zandra nudged him. “May I, dear?” she asked.**

**Deiniol rolled his eyes; he whispered. “Again? Verily, you may. But only because you asked and I love you so. But try not to enjoy it *too much*!”**

**Deiniol stood up; all eyes were now upon him. Zandra, however, slowly walked over to stand beside Malakiah. Watching Deiniol, he gave her approach no heed. Then, to his surprise, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and gave him a passionate kiss. All at the table, after their initial astonishment, broke out into laughter and applause.**

**“Congratulations, Mal,” said Deiniol. “Just expect not another.” He sat down again.**

**“Verily so! Congratulations, Candidate,” she said after breaking her hold on him.**

**Malakiah could only stare at her in surprise; any thought sprites within his mind were dumbfounded.**

**“I so love congratulating you handsome candidates,” she added with a smile, walking away.**

**“Zandra,” said Randius, “I too am a candidate-to-be.”**

**“And so am I!” added Vidar, eagerly.**

**“My favors are intended not for you!” she smirked, looking in their direction. “Not unless the party is in your honor!”**

**“My dear Zandra,” said Jefhian, “we three shall be candidates in six months.” He indicated himself, Hathian, and Scottius. “Pray save some of your marvelous embraces for us.”**

**“Six months?” replied Zandra, “by then only if Deiniol still grants his permission.”**

**“Such could be possible,” said Deiniol, “for a small consideration.” He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together repeatedly. Zandra cuffed him on the back of the head.**

**“Best pray, Deiniol,” remarked Mishael, “she hits you no harder than that after you have married her!”**

**“If such a delight is the reward for becoming a candidate,” Hananiah commented, “perhaps I shall consider it.” He turned to Hathian seated across from him. “How many years would it take one to complete knightly training at your Academy?”**

**“Three for the very lucky; five years for most,” answered Hathian.**

**“By then, Hananiah,” said Zandra with a smirk, “any chance you would have of receiving any favor from me would be long past.”**

**“Except, perhaps, for a huge consideration!” quipped Deiniol.**

**Again, Zandra cuffed him on the back of the head. But this time, Deiniol, expecting such from her, pretended its force had been strong enough to propel his head forward and cause his forehead to slam against the table. The resulting thud as it struck made all at the table laugh most heartily.**

**Suddenly, Malakiah ceased laughing as he noticed four others had entered the room. Whithus, the cousins, Randius, and Vidar also stopped when they saw the uninvited ones standing by the door. The newcomers were individuals none of them liked—namely Drakos and his cronies Iland, Dreg, and Darrell.**

**Drakos had become a knight several months ago. Those others with him, though, were but third-year squires. In the last few years, the four of them had acquired a reputation for causing trouble in Suena, but never to the degree either the Knighthood or the Academy would discipline them. Malakiah knew not why they had chosen now to intrude upon his party or even how they had come upon it. He did, however, want them gone.**

**“Sir Drakos, Iland, Dreg, and Darrell,” he said, addressing them politely, “this party is a private affair. Pray leave as your presence is not requested.”**

**“Not requested?” repeated Drakos, mockingly. “How rude of you. Will you not even offer your fellow members of the Perencian Order a drink? That is most inhospitable to us, your brothers in the Order.”**

**Scottius rose from his chair. “Leave while you can still walk, you son of a troll,” he snarled.**

**Hathian placed a hand on Scottius’ shoulder to coax him back into his chair. “Verily,” he said, “we shall offer you four a drink—if you should care to join us in our next toast.”**

**“A toast?” asked Drakos. “And what shall you be toasting?”**

**“The Academy’s newest knight candidate-to-be, Malakiah.”**

**Drakos smirked. “Then how low the Academy’s standards must have declined to accept him as such.” He glared at Malakiah. “I shall never raise a mug to him.”**

**These words caused a murmur from those seated at the table. Malakiah, however, refused to let Drakos’ remark anger him. He knew a mere word or gesture from him could provoke a fight. Such, he was also aware, would end disastrously. They would all face discipline from both the Academy and the civic authorities. Best then, he knew, he should let the taunt just pass unaddressed.**

**“Sir Drakos,” said Malakiah, calmly, “since you decline the offered drink, you and your associates may depart. As I have said, this party is a private affair.”**

**“Verily, I shall not,” returned Drakos, now crossing his arms defiantly. “If the Academy would foolishly accept such as you as a ‘knight candidate,’ I have a will to stay and see if you could pass a challenge that shows whether you deserve such.”**

**Try as he might to avoid it, Malakiah felt Drakos raising his dragon. “Name your challenge, then, you oaf!” he cried.**

**Drakos smiled grimly. “The one called ‘The Twelve Drinks.’”**

**“I know it not.”**

**“I have heard of it,” said Jefhian. “The one challenged must down twelve short drinks of various types. After each one, he must recite correctly the next of the Twelve Commandments of the Perencian Order of Knights. The challenge continues until he gives all twelve correctly, says one incorrectly or misses it, or passes out.”**

**“What a ridiculous test!” protested Deiniol. “It reveals naught but a man’s ability to hold his alcohol.”**

**“Wrong, you dolt!” snarled Drakos, glaring at Deiniol. “It shows a man’s mettle.” Then he turned his glare upon Malakiah, saying, “I passed such; now, I challenge you, Malakiah, to show you can! What say you?”**

**Malakiah dwelt upon Drakos’ words for a moment; then he looked to the others at his table to assess their feelings. Whithus spoke first.**

**“Kiah,” he advised, “shun this vile challenge. You need to prove nothing to Drakos.”**

**Jefhian and Hathian, when Malakiah looked toward them, just shrugged. Scottius, who was never one to decline a challenge, nodded. Vidar, Randius, and the others just looked indecisive.**

**Consequently, the decision fell to Malakiah to make. He would never know why he accepted it. Perhaps it was the ale.**

**The stakes were agreed upon. Should Malakiah pass the test, Drakos would buy a round of drinks, offer a congratulatory toast to Malakiah, and then depart.**

**“However, when you instead *lose*,” Drakos said with a sneer, “you shall, knave, go up on the stage of this very tavern, dressed as a serving wench, and sing before all the patrons. And the song which you shall sing shall be, ‘Roll me over, in the Clover.’”**

**Drakos smirked. The song which he had chosen was most risqué. Word of Malakiah’s performing such should surely reach the Academy and subject him to discipline.**

**Malakiah now regretted having accepted the challenge. *Singing with Vesta had been bad enough. But standing garbed as a tavern wench before patrons and warbling a bawdry song—such was unthinkable!* He would dearly hate to lose this challenge. Then, to his surprise, he saw Jefhian stand up. *What might his friend wish to add?***

**“Drakos,” said Jefhian, “anyone who has known you during your term at the Academy would describe you using two words—‘ogre sphincter.’”**

**Drakos glared at Jefhian. Iland started toward Jefhian but Drakos held him back.**

**“Let the whelp talk,” Drakos said. “If he has the spine to speak to me such, I would hear his words. Then make him choke upon them.”**

**Jefhian continued. “You abused anyone whom you could while you attended the Academy. Now, I would have you make amends. Let us increase these stakes. If Malakiah wins, you, Drakos, besides the toast, must also give a lecture at the Academy to the cadets on proper knightly etiquette; such must meet the approval of Warden Haydian. And you shall illustrate it with horrible examples drawn from your past behavior. It will serve as your public apology to all whom you have mistreated.”**

**Drakos smirked. “Such a contrite display would amuse you, would it not? As I am assured Malakiah shall falter in his attempt, I accept that challenge. But now hear you the new humiliation he—and you all—must endure when he fails. All of you must join him on the stage, dressed as wenches, and sing as well. Each of you sings a verse alone and the chorus as a group.” He smiled. “The crowd may cringe, cover their ears, and run outside. But I shall enjoy hearing such a wailing.”**

**“All of us singing?” asked Deiniol timidly.**

**“I shall exempt any not of the Academy—you are beneath my notice.”**

**“I know not whether to be pleased or offended,” muttered Gregian.**

**“Think you could find a skirt to fit me?” growled Scottius.**

**“Use a tablecloth for all I care,” snarled Drakos, “but, when he loses, perform you shall.” He now turned to Malakiah. “So, you who would consider yourself worthy of being a knight candidate, have you the *stuff* to take this challenge? To cause your friends to be humiliated?”**

**Malakiah looked to Whithus, the cousins, Randius, and Vidar. “This matter now concerns you as well. Will you risk this endeavor with me?”**

**His friends all nodded. “All for one,” said Hathian.**

**Malakiah turned back to Drakos. “Bring forth the challenge.”**

**Zandra brought twelve short drink glasses (small ones designed to hold only two swallows of liquid.) She had been instructed to have the first three filled with apple ale, the second three with strong ale, the third three half with strong ale and half with a potent alcoholic drink, and the last three filled with the potent drink only. She set the tray bearing the drinks before Malakiah; to his surprise she gave him a quick kiss on the forehead and wished him luck.**

**Before he started, Hathian offered Malakiah some advice.**

**“Mal, I have heard in this challenge there is a degree of danger for those who drink too much too fast. Therefore, my friend, I counsel you to drink most slowly; take your time while you recite each commandment. Far better you pass out and lose than proceed too quickly—despite what the losing shall cost us.”**

**Malakiah nodded.**

**“Kiah,” Whithus added, “I cannot ask Adonai to grant you His blessing on this endeavor. I surely think He would not approve of what you are attempting. But I wish you luck.”**

**The others around the table did the same.**

**Then Malakiah began. He emptied the initial glass, turned it over, and, in a clear voice, recited the first commandment, “Study the teachings of Adonai and observe them always.”**

**Those around him cheered as he reached for the second glass.**

**Slowly, he progressed through the drink selections, finding the taste of the earliest ones more to his liking. He also appreciated his friends’ encouragement as he continued.**

**Half an hour later, he slowly and unsteadily turned over the last small glass. Then, smiling at the frowning Drakos, he recited the last commandment although his speech was now quite slurred. “Strive always . . . in all things for . . the benefit of all society—never just for . . . yourself.”**

**Malakiah was pleased. His friends slapped him heartily upon his back. He hardly felt their hands upon him, though.**

**Drakos, now in a foul humor, conceded. To his credit, though, the knight fulfilled the agreement; he offered the toast in Malakiah’s honor and then he and his associates left.**

**“And, Drakos, I remind you of the eighth commandment, ‘Your honor is tantamount; never lie or go back on your word.’ You promised, if Malakiah met your challenge, to give a specified lecture. We shall look forward to hearing it.” Jefhian shouted after him.**

**The party continued, but Malakiah remembered very little of the rest of it. He instead woke up the next morning lying on his bunk in the Fortress with no memory of how he had gotten there and glad he had had friends willing to convey him there. He was not pleased, however, to hear the sounding of the gong. He groaned and covered his head with his pillow.**